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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program that has evolved in District No. 4 in the East Harlem area of Manhattan (New York). There, a system of "choice" at the junior high school level is possible due in part to the latitude afforded local school districts under the current decentralized system of authority. The program permits students and parents to select an intermediate school from a list of differentiated alternative schools other than the school that the children would be assigned to according to the "zoning" of the community. This element of choice can provide the catalyst for educational reform by introducing a market mechanism into the public school system--if parents are permitted to choose which school their children will attend, each school has reason to question how its own educational program might improve. This paper explores the steps experienced in establishing a system of parental choice, describes some lessons that were learned in the process of establishing this system, and considers current prospects for similar developments given the current attitude toward decentralized reform in the city of New York. Two tables and a list of six sources are included. (JS)

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CREATIVE NON-COMPLIANCE IN EAST HARLEM SCHOOLS

Seymour Fliegel

This paper was prepared for the Conference on Choice and Control in American Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison, May 17-19, 1989.

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Creative Non-Compliance in East Harlem Schools

The current furor over corruption and incompetence in local school districts in New York City has provoked another outcry for dismantling the decentralized system instituted in the 1960's and "recentralizing" power within the school system so that the Central Board of Education exerts increased authority over all of the city's schools. Before addressing the issue of relocated authority, I'd like to describe one program which has evolved in East Harlem, made possible by the latitude afforded local school districts under the current arrangement.

Over the past two decades, District No. 4 in Manhattan has developed a system of "choice" at the junior high school level which permits students and parents to select an intermediate school from a list of differentiated alternatives available to them. Our thinking followed these lines: youngsters in private and parochial schools have long enjoyed systems that allow for individual preferences; why should children in public schools fail to benefit from the opportunity to select a quality school that meets their interests and abilities? In District No. 4, we proceeded on the belief that what is good for the children of the rich is good for the children of East Harlem.

Our motive was to better our schools. Parental choice can provide the catalyst for educational reform by introducing a

market mechanism into the public school system--if parents are permitted to choose which school their children will attend, each school has reason to question how its own educational program might be improved. If this questioning becomes widespread, and a reasonable degree of support is forthcoming, a school district can become a marketplace for ideas, innovations, and investments. In additions to the bracing effect of "competition" for informed students, parental choice in public education can increase the sense of ownership in a school for parents, students, teachers, and administrators. While choice in itself is not a panacea, it can stimulate a framework for improvement efforts in districts and individual schools.

In these pages I will describe our experience establishing a system of parental choice, draw some lessons we learned in the process, and consider current prospects for similar developments given the current attitude toward decentralized reform in the City of New York.

The Alternative School Approach in District No. 4

When I was Principal of P.S. 146 in Manhattan, I found one year-end ritual particularly disheartening. Each June, a number of parents of graduating sixth-graders would find my office to express concern about the local junior high schools to which their children would be assigned according to the "zoning" of the

community. These were invariably the best-informed parents, whose information about the local junior high schools provided some grounds for genuine concern. I knew the reputations of the schools to which their children would be sent: they had reason to worry. And yet, the best suggestion I could make--the best the system could offer--was, "Why don't you use someone else's address?"

Teachers and principals in other school districts have certainly given similar advice to worried parents of elementary school graduates, but the situation in East Harlem at the time was especially troubling. In 1973 the schools in District No. 4 ranked thirty-second out of thirty-two districts in the City of New York by reading and mathematics scores. Less than sixteen percent of the students in the district were reading at or above grade level.

These numbers describe a school district that is not working to educate its children and an unlikely site for ground-breaking educational reform. Expectations of improvement were not high at the central Board of Education, and funds for that purpose were not forthcoming. Nor was assistance likely to come from parents of children enrolled in the schools: families in the surrounding community lack the financial resources which are usually needed for any sort of enrichment at the individual school level or innovative experimental program.

District No. 4 is located in New York's East Harlem

neighborhood, sometimes called Spanish Harlem or "El Barrio." Approximately sixty-five percent of the population is Hispanic, thirty-four percent Black, and one percent non-minorities. Its geographical boundaries extend from 96th Street to 125th Street and from Fifth Avenue to the East River. The poverty and ethnic isolation of the community is in stark visible contrast to the well-heeled Manhattan neighborhoods to the south.

Statistics make dull reading unless they're understood as referring to people--in this case, to suggest the obstacles confronting the students of District No. 4, and the environment surrounding the schools. East Harlem has the eighth highest rate of welfare recipients among the twenty-six poverty areas of New York City. Thirty-one percent of the population receives assistance from the Department of Social Services; this number is double that of New York County and the City as a whole, and nearly three times the median for New York State. Twenty-seven percent of the households in East Harlem are headed by single parents; this compares with nine percent in New York County and a State median of seven percent. Almost a third of the people in East Harlem are adolescents, twice the percentage in Manhattan as a whole.

Conventional wisdom and demography suggests District No. 4 would be a difficult place to produce any significant educational change. And yet the desperation of the educational and economic prospects of the community provided something of a spur to reform

in East Harlem schools. I believe in the judo principle--using the force of your opponent or opposition to make headway, turning a negative force into a positive one. A failing system allows for innovation and risk taking that a mildly (or inconsistently) successful system might not allow. The leadership in District No. 4 chose to take risks and be innovative, in part because it had nowhere to go but up.

Meaningful change can take place in the education of youngsters in what appears to be the most difficult situations. In East Harlem we had the opportunity to implement changes, and we began slowly. We did not have a long-range plan that has brought the district step-by-step to where it is today. If I had to characterize the process, I'd say ours developed organically, growing out of the needs, the aspirations, the energies, and the visions of a number of dedicated educators, parents, and community leaders.

The First Phase: Creating Alternatives

In 1974 we started three small alternative concept schools. One of those schools was the B.E.T.A. School--Better Education Through Alternatives. B.E.T.A. is the kind of alternative school that is always supported by everyone, including those people who do not support alternative education, because the school offers, "Give us your troubled youngsters and we will take them off your

hands." I have often thought that you could raise support for this kind of alternative school if it consisted of no more than the facade of a school building sitting on the edge of a cliff. Principals in other schools would be happy to transfer youngsters who are acting out in class, who take too much of their time and who are not succeeding in their academic programs.

The B.E.T.A. School was a success from the first day it opened. We were able to provide those "acting out" youngsters with a learning environment that accepted them as individuals who had difficulties adjusting to the regular school program. Three years after opening, it was cited as a model program. Enrollment in the B.E.T.A. school is one measure of the improvement that has taken place in all the schools in District No. 4: at one time there were 240 students enrolled, while today there are less than 60 "acting out" youngsters in the district.

The B.E.T.A. School was designed for a specific student population--troublesome students--and its usefulness for people teaching and learning in the regular schools was clear from the outset. Not all new alternative concept schools are so warmly welcomed. At the same time as the B.E.T.A. School was started, we opened the East Harlem Performing Arts School and Central Park East--neither with a mandate to take on disruptive youngsters. In Quality Education in the Inner City: the Story of the Central Park East Schools, David Bensman of Rutger's University describes the early days of Central Park East:

> In the summer of 1974, staff members of what would soon be Central Park East School (CPE) began posting fliers in East Harlem Day Care and Head Start centers to announce the opening of their new elementary school that fall. Their school-to-be had no constituency, no student body, no base of support in the poor, largely Hispanic community where it would be located. Its physical facilities--two floors of a seventy-five year old, run-down elementary school on 103rd Street between Fifth Avenue and Madison--could hardly have been less hospitable to the open classrooms the staff aimed to create.

The building was already occupied by a regular school, whose principal outranked the fledgling director of Central Park East; no grant money was available, nor were special provisions made for exemptions from the many rules of the Central Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers. Educational reformers in the district, then engaged in developing bilingual programs, regarded the new venture as a rival for resources; conservatives were suspicious of its "permissive" educational philosophy. Its reputation had to be built on the experience of children in it classes--word of which spread rapidly through the district and beyond. Bensman reports:

By 1984, as the school celebrated its tenth anniversary, CPE was widely hailed as a success. Well-known educators from across America extolled its innovative practices and its startling successes. At the local level, the school's reputation ensured it had more applicants that it could accommodate, while parents from distant neighborhoods desperately sought admittance for their children.

The third of our original alternative concept schools, the East Harlem Performing Arts School, has been renamed the Jose Feliciano School, and has been adopted by the performer as a cause for benefit performances. It is one of the largest alternative schools in the district and is recognized as one of the outstanding performing arts schools in the City. Students are accepted on the basis of their interest in the arts rather than their proficiency, an admissions policy decision with many benevolent consequences for the academic curriculum.

By 1976 there were six alternative schools in District No. 4 and I was appointed the first Director of the program as a whole. My job, as I understood it, was to nourish, support, and protect the existing alternative schools and to develop new schools which

would offer students in East Harlem real alternatives to the local junior high schools their geographic location would otherwise select for them. Having broken the mindset of one school per geographic location, we were free to design schools as we felt they should be designed, reflecting our own biases and imaginations.

I believe planning is essential. Central bureaucracies, however, tend to plan too much and do too little. In New York City, they take three years to plan a failing high school. Much of the energy and excitement of a new project can be exhausted before the school opens; too often, the people responsible for running the school have not played major roles in the development of the plan. We wanted to make certain that our own bureaucrats in the district office didn't get in the way of new ideas and enthusiasms. The role we played at the district office was to create an environment that encouraged dreamers and planner to come forward with their visions, and then to help them develop their dreams into realities. We made judgments with regard to the credibility of a plan, and the role of the proposed school in our overall vision of the district. We were aware of the kinds of schools we needed to broaden our appeal and meet the needs of students we were not reaching. But the idea for each school had to arise from the local level as an expression of the personnel whose personal commitment would eventually determine the success or failure of the enterprise.

The process of change in District No. 4 was a process in which teachers or principals came forward with proposals for new alternative schools, each with a philosophy or organizing theme for the new school, and were met with approval and encouragement from the leadership of the district. Revealingly, despite the diversity of personalities and philosophies of the teachers who presented ideas and plans for the new programs, their reactions, when given the final okay, were always the same. They were shocked and surprised and usually asked, "Do you mean it?" Their expectation of the educational system was that even when people express admiration and support for a new idea, the establishment would always find a reason for not being able to do it at that time. This expected attitude of complacency about the status quo is far easier to maintain in districts where enrollments are guaranteed by geographical zoning; when students and parents are given a choice among schools, enthusiasm and imagination on the part of teaching staff are quickly more highly esteemed.

Over the next ten years, twenty-three alternative schools were approved and established. We built them one by one, expanding earlier schools or adding new ones where teachers in the district were willing to work together to develop a more exciting place to teach. Each prospective Director was carefully screened and had demonstrated success in a previous position.

The further development of the Central Park East schools provides a good example of the process by which parental choice

was extended throughout the district. The original Central Park East school was so successful that CPE II was opened, and River East became the third elementary school following the philosophy and practices of CPE I. Debbie Meier, Director of the original Central Park East and a gifted educator, was awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant for her work in creating the schools. In an article in the January 1986 issue of New York Magazine titled, "The Middle-Class Parents' Guide to the Public Schools," Katherine Davis Fishman ascribed the growth of the Central Park East Schools to the strong word-of-mouth earned by the first among parents in the community:

> Three magnet schools, each with two or three grades and about 90 students, were launched in District No. 4 in the mid-seventies. Each was given a few classrooms in a larger school, and the teachers who ran them agreed to take on directors' responsibilities with no salary increase...
>
> One of the District's original magnet schools, Central Park East at 19 East 103rd Street, has earned considerable recognition. As an elementary school, it received such a strong park-bench press that it had to reproduce itself twice in order to meet the demand without losing intimacy.

In 1985 we opened the Central Park East Secondary School, starting with grade seven. Eventually the school will include grades seven through twelve. The school is guided by the principles advanced by the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national organization of public and private high schools directed by Theodore Sizer, Dean of Education at Brown University. Briefly stated, these principles include the idea that less is more: it is better to know some things well than to know many things superficially. High standards are set for all students, with students required to be able to demonstrate mastery of a subject. Teaching and learning are personalized; students are perceived as workers, and teachers as coaches. Students discover answers and solutions, and learn by doing.

CPESS offers a common core curriculum for all students in grades seven through ten, organized around two major fields: Mathematics/Science for half the school day, and Humanities (including art, history, social studies, and literature) for the other half. Every effort is made to integrate academic disciplines, so that students recognize and understand the relationships between different subjects of study. Communication skills (both writing and public speaking) are taught in all subjects by all staff members, regardless of disciplinary focus.

Different educational philosophies, of course, attract different students, whose parents may feel strongly about one or another approach to their children's learning. Programs which

allow choice among public schools provoke staff to define, for themselves as well as for parents of potential students, the ideas about education which inform their teaching practices. What is essential is not whether a given school subscribes to a more progressive or more traditional philosophy, but that the schooling reflect the enthusiasm and commitment of its teachers in an academic program that is sound, integrated and rigorous.

The Second Phase: Opting For Choice

By 1982, the Alternative Schools Program had enough of a reputation to invite all of the students in the district to select a junior high school from a list of offerings whose diversity and quality amounted to a real choice. The move to a district-wide system of parental choice was noted in an editorial in the New York Times on March 25, 1982:

> New York's District No. 4 has done it again. For nearly a decade, the East Harlem Community District has been a font of innovation, offering "alternative" junior high schools that give students unusual choices. Now it will take the further step of allowing seventh-graders to attend whatever district school they like. (New York Times, 1982).

The program does not in fact allow students to choose to attend "any junior high school they like"--each child of age for junior high school is sent an application form with three alternatives listed, among which the students and his or her family may chooses. All of the schools are described in an accompanying pamphlet, which tells about the educational theme or philosophy of each, its special rules and requirements. Prospective students must apply for entrance into the alternative schools, who decide whether a given student is granted admission. But choices are fairly distributed, admission policies are reasonably drawn, and the quality of the alternative schools is high enough for an estimated 90% of students to gain entrance into at least one school of choice.

Results of the move to choice were dramatic: today, more than sixty-four percent of students in District No. 4 read at or above grade level, and, since 1981, the district has ranked sixteenth to eighteenth among 32 districts citywide in reading, and twenty-first in mathematics. While these tests are viewed as problematic by some of our directors, who question their accuracy and usefulness, most accept them as necessary and realize that improved scores can buy freedom and autonomy for an alternative school.

Community School District No. 4, Manhattan
Percentage of Students Reading At or Above Grade Level (Table 1)

1973	15.9%
1974	15.3%
1975	28.3%
1976	27.9%
1977	29.7%
1978	25.9%
1979	25.9%
1980	35.6%
1981	44.3%
1982	48.5%
1983	52.3%
1984	48.1%
1986	62.2%
1987	62.6%
1988	64.9%

The citywide testing instrument for the years 1982-1985 was the California Achievement Test in Reading. The population reflected includes grades two through nine. The citywide testing instrument was changed in Spring 1986 to the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP), testing grades three through nine.

Before the development of alternative schools, only one child in six in District No. 4 was reading at or above grade level; after the introduction of parental choice, more than three out of five are doing so. Over the last few years, as news of our success spread beyond the borders of the district, students from other areas have been drawn to our schools. These have not, however, unduly influenced our measures of improvement. Of those who came

from outside the district, 49.4% were reading below grade level; our highest ranked elementary school had fewer than 2% of its students coming from outside the district.

Though less striking, mathematics scores have also improved, nearly ten points over four years in the district:

Community School District No. 4, Manhattan
Percentage of Students Performing
At or Above Grade Level in Mathematics
(Table 2)

1982	41.8%
1983	49.0%
1984	50.6%
1985	51.0%

The citywide testing instrument used in the years 1982-1985 was the Stanford Diagnostic Mathematics Tests. The tested population included grades two through nine.

A measure which directly reflects junior high school achievement is the rate of admission into New York City's specialized high schools: the Bronx High School of Science, Stuyvesant High School, Brooklyn Tech, and LaGuardia High School (the former Music and Art and Performing Arts High School), each of which requires an entrance examination. The test is basically one of reading and mathematics ability. While in 1973 only ten youngsters from District No. 4 were accepted into specialized or private high schools, in 1987 over 250 youngsters were accepted

into these schools. In the same year, seventy-five percent of the district's eighth graders were found to be competent writers on statewide examinations.

Today, District No. 4 serves approximately 15,000 students, enrolled in pre-kindergarten to grade nine. The district is noted for its range of quality educational program choices. Twenty-one school sites house sixteen regular elementary school programs, nine bilingual schools, twenty-three alternative schools, and two high schools.

Each alternative school program has a thematic core, from science to sports, around which curriculum is structured. These quality educational option programs have attracted students from all over the city. The bilingual schools incorporate programs that support the rentention of Spanish language and culture while promoting English language skills and content area learning. As a result of these option programs, District No. 4 has experienced what counts as success in New York school districts: dramatic improvements in reading and mathematics scores and in student placement in the city's academically enriched high schools.

What Makes a Good School?

Extrapolating general "principles" from our experience in District No. 4 inevitably leads to conclusions which make social

scientists uneasy. Good experimental conclusions require optimally the neutral context of a laboratory, or minimally some effort to control for variables, but we had the advantages of neither as we set about improving our schools. Most classroom reformers, however, find themselves in similar circumstances, since schools are never neutral, and variables are impossible to control. For an excellent summary of the research on choice, see Mary Anne Raywid's "The Mounting Case for Schools of Choice" (Raywid, 1988); given the constraints on experimental design of our work in East Harlem, I prefer to label my experiential conclusions not "findings" but "biases"--a term which connotes the personal edge these prescriptions include.

Bias #1. I believe strongly in public education; when I speak about choice, it is in regard to public schools. Youngsters attending private schools are already part of a choice system. Public education cannot take its constituency for granted; our responsibility is to provide a variety of quality educational opportunities for children.

Bias #2. Choice is only meaningful when quality and diversity are involved. Diversity is developed through increased autonomy--school site management and shared decision making.

Bias #3. In order to get somewhere, you have to know where you want to go. Without a vision, dream, or mission for a school, the school will go nowhere. A school is an idea, not a building. But it is important to keep in mind that the theme of a school is only a vehicle for motivating students to higher achievement. A school dedicated to the Performing Arts can raise reading and math test scores by providing an environment that encourages and respects students' interests.

Bias #4. Teaching and learning are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate the two. In lecturing about teaching and learning, Neil Postman produced the sentence, "I taught that but the students didn't learn it," and asked his class to define the word "taught" as it was used in that sentence. The word meant something like "announced" or "presented"--verbs which refer only to half the rhetorical transaction.

I don't think teaching takes place until learning occurs. For example, I would never say that I taught my son to swim but he can't stay afloat. I may have attempted to teach him, but if he can't keep his head above water, I haven't succeeded in my teaching. In good schools, teaching is understood as inextricably linked to the learning that accompanies it.

Bias #5. It is how you treat people that determines how they behave. George Bernard Shaw illustrates the idea elegantly in Pygmalion when the difference between a lady and a flower girl is defined not by her inheritance but her treatment.

When children, parents, and professionals are treated with respect and high expectations, they will respond accordingly. On the other hand, when youngsters are treated without respect and with low expectations, you can be sure they will not disappoint you.

Bias #6. Smaller schools are better for children than larger schools. Youngsters don't get lost easily in small schools. Teachers and students get to know each other in a personal way; students don't feel alienated from their own education.

Bias #7. Extending ownership of the schools to students, parents, and professional staff enhances academic performance. People treat what they own better than what they don't own. Ownership is intimately connected to the experience of the environment of a school.

"Ownership," is the feeling among teachers and students that a given school is really theirs. The Program of Alternative Schools in District No. 4 was designed to foster this sense of ownership in every possible case. Rather than drawing up a program of alternative schools in the district office and then finding people to staff the relevant roles, we invited those teachers and principals who held particular educational points of view to propose their own alternative schools, which would be provided building space and the resources necessary to put their ideas to work.

Just as ownership develops when students and parents are given opportunities to select a school geared to their own interests and abilities, so too does it develop when teachers can create and work in a school in accord with their own beliefs about effective education. By encouraging professional staff members to develop innovative programs based on interests, talents, or philosophical tenets, and by giving them chances to realize their dreams and participate in the decision-making process, a district can succeed in maximizing the potential of the teachers and students working together in its schools.

Implementing Choice: Suggestions and Cautions

I have already referred to some of the resistance faced by the new alternative schools, and have cited David Bensman's

account of the obstacles faced by Central Park East as its staff began to build a different kind of school in the midst of an existing public system. Each school faced its own challenges in that process; those with sufficient commitment on the part of its staff, and interest on the part of its students, prospered. I generally hold to the principle: if a major change or innnovation is not threatening to stakeholders, it is probably not worth doing. And the corollary: growth without some friction will result in an easy backslide. The changes we made in the district were threatening to some teachers and principals, who had to be involved in the process, if possible, or reassured, if not. But throughout the history of the program, only one alternative school failed in its attempt.

The program itself, of course, encountered resistance, but most of it has been overcome by the improvements in mathematics and reading scores and by the enthusiastic support of students and parents in our district. We did not allow anxiety over unforeseen consequences of the change or the attitudes of educational authorities to dictate the form and adequacy of the schooling we provided.

I do want to share some cautions and suggestions regarding free parental choice systems. As choice (in one form or another) becomes popular, it becomes attractive as a way to solve larger educational problems. A system of parental choice such as the one I have been outlining can help stimulate creative programming

on the part of district administrators, stir teachers to take a more active part in helping students learn, and motivate children to engage in the educational process in a more personal way--but it cannot solve all problems confronting the schools. Overly ambitious expectations can kill any new idea; we are always looking for panaceas but seldom find them.

Choice has to be approached carefully and slowly. In District No. 4, we started with three alternative schools, and concerned ourselves with quality and diversity within those three. Our development was organic; we did not begin with a grand plan that envisioned forty-nine different schools in twenty buildings. When I hear about a school district deciding to become a complete choice system overnight, I worry. Quality schools--with a guiding vision, a staff committed to that vision, a curriculum reflecting that commitment, and a student body intellectually engaged with the issues of that curriculum--take time to develop. If you already have a wide variety of quality schools, choice can be offered more broadly. In New York, we needed to institute choice as a mechanism for school improvement. None of the proponents of choice that I know consider it a panacea--it is the opponents of choice who use that word in denouncing the idea.

Without quality and diversity of educational offerings, choice is a meaningless policy. Choice does encoursage diversity when it provokes increased school site management and planning.

But if choice is to be the catalyst for diversity and quality, it should be instituted with sufficient care and time. It is much better to have, at first, a few schools that are oversubscribed because of the quality and diversity they offer than to have a larger number of poor choices for everyone. Once those few are established, demonstrating that a quality educational environment can be provided, the development of others becomes easier, until a network of schools emerges that can eventually open choice to all students.

Start in a small way, but make each start a success. Determine what kinds of schools are attractive to the parents and students in the community to be served by the school. Our experiences in East Harlem (and reports I have heard from people around the country) suggest it is often easier to start an open-education or progressive-education elementary school than some other kinds because there are always parents interested in that philosophical approach who are often dissatisfied with the existing traditional schools. On the junior high level, performing arts schools or schools for science and math have demonstrated strong popular appeal.

In District No. 4 our experience has underscored the benefits of starting small, with only an opening grade. On the junior high level, two classes of seventh graders make a good beginning. Over the course of the next two years, take in another two classes of seventh graders. At the end of three

years, allow six classes in seventh, eighth, and ninth grades. Avoid the trap of too-rapid growth--for some reason, almost everyone likes to expand when they have a well-organized, productive school that is able to maintain a family atmosphere and allows staff and students to get to know and care for each other. If you must, add two more classes and stop.

The question of exceptional leaders is raised whenever the possibility of replication is discussed. I feel that every school district in this country has the potential leaders necessary for effective and stimulating educational opportunities. In District No. 4, we established a climate that encouraged teachers to come forward with their ideas about how to educate youngsters. Most of our successful schools grew from a concept by a director and/or principal who had some personal vision and the chance to to develop that vision; they were able to communicate their ideas to teachers, students, and parents, who then took ownership of the dream. Our requirement was that a new director had to be successful at what he or she was already doing and willing to put in extra time, energy and enthusiasm to make the dream a reality.

Once a school director is identified, a sympathetic administrator must be responsible to provide real support: adequate space, funds, and personnel. Any new school needs time, encouragement, and protection for its philosophical base. The district leadership must have confidence in the new school's

leadership even when they do some foolish things--mistakes will be made whenever risk-taking occurs. Wherever possible, visible symbols of support and recognition should be awarded the new school. And sometimes this support must be more than symbolic: if, for example, the alternative school is sharing space in an existing school building, at some point the staff of the new school will infringe upon the prerogatives or otherwise slight the principal of the original school in the building. It becomes the supervisor's role to somehow soothe the injured party, and nothing is as soothing as some additional funds or equipment.

All of the schools in District No. 4 were required to recognize that the mission of the district is to improve learning. Principals and directors must provide leadership by ensuring an instructional environment that is conducive to intellectual, emotional, and social development. Schools have to be good places for youngsters and adults to share experiences and engage one another for their mutual growth--a requirement which is true, of course, for any school, progressive or traditional.

I have thus far discussed the steps that must be considered in setting up a new alternative school intended to participate in a system of educational choice. Similar steps can be taken when preparing an existing traditional school to join a system of choice. In may ways it is better and easier if an established principal and staff opt to become a school of choice--it can help avoid a good deal of maneuvering for power and territory. Of

course, the best way to support a new school is to demonstrate to the community and to critics of all persuasions that the school provides a quality education for its students; high scores on standardized tests never seem to hurt a developing school.

Parental involvement at the school's inception can help protect a new school and build a constituency rapidly. Some critics insist that choice cannot work in inner-city school systems because inner-city parents lack the education needed to make informed choices...but those critics are wrong. Inner-city minority parents are no less concerned than their middle-class counterparts to see their children educated in stimulating, orderly, vigorous schools, and no less capable of choosing those schools when information is made available to them. Their lack of resources rarely presents them with educational choices but their aspirations for their children are no more limited than those of more affluent parents. And schooling often represents to an inner-city student the only avenue of escape from a situation much more desperate than that confronting a middle-class peer.

It has been a long time since I was disheartened by the inadequate response we would give to parents who were dissatisfied with their zoned schools. Today, parents in East Harlem do not have to present phony addresses to enroll their children in superior educational programs. To help them choose among alternatives at the intermediate level, they receive a

simple application after an orientation process that includes classroom lessons in decision-making, a booklet that describes all the schools, meetings where school representatives and parents discuss each of the choices available, and school visits by parents and prospective students. This process allows them to make the best choices for and with their children.

District No. 4 has received recognition from many sources outside of our community. The media and educational observers tend to focus on reading and mathematics scores. The greater satisfaction to me comes from the pride in and support of the district from the parents, students, and staff members who meet in its schools. Their imagination, hard work, and persistence gave rise to the strong academic alternatives that made choice at the intermediate level an important opportunity for children in the community. How this potential was enlivened, liberated, and directed must be counted among the important lessons of the East Harlem experiment.

Current Prospects: Choice and Recentralization

In some respects, the prospects for choice in public education have never been better than they are at this moment: at the White House Conference on Choice this past January, President Bush declared his support of choice in public education when he said, "expanding parents' rights to choose public schools

is a national imperative," an opinion which has been noted and seconded by politicians across the country. It is ironic, then, that the prospects for choice in District No. 4, and in New York City more generally, have been placed at grave risk by the call for recentralization, for returning greater power over local schools to the Central Board of Education.

The success of District No. 4 in improving reading and mathematics scores, in preparing our students for special high schools and beyond, has stemmed from our ability to elicit from our staff the vision and energy to create better educational programs for the children of East Harlem. Our ability to do so derives from a willingness to allow people to express their imagination and commitment as they saw fit, by allowing them some measure of autonomy over the schools in which they teach. This autonomy, a sharing of decisions that affect teachers and students, was possible in East Harlem because authority had already been shared with the district under the system of decentralization. We were able to allow individual teachers to participate in the policy and philosophy of their schools because the district had won the authority to decide where that decision-making power could be trusted. And where we did not have the authority, we took it.

John Chubb, Senior Fellow of the Brookings Institute, argues in a forthcoming book that administrative bureaucracy is itself a significant obstacle to effective schooling. "The more

centralized a school system, the worse the achievement of its students," he writes.

> Schools are more likely to pursue ambitious missions and develop strong leadership and professionalism if they are relatively free from constraints on hiring, firing, curriculum, instruction, and discipline...much like other professionals, educators seem to function more effectively if they are given the freedom to organize themselves and serve their clients according to their best judgments.
>
> To be sure, central administrators are reluctant to grant principals and teachers the autonomy to shape their own schools, because more autonomy seems to mean less accountability. But autonomy disciplined by parental choice provides substantial accountability. (Chubb and Moe)

Chubb wants to do away with bureaucracy in order to improve the schools. Another alternative available to school district administrators in my experience has been to ignore the central administration. In some respects, a large bureaucracy can be helpful because of its size: no one is willing to take responsibility for much that happens. A vacuum is created that

allows an innovator room to begin to implement a change. Once something is started, if it makes some sense, it is very difficult for centralized administrators to stop it, especially if it crosses lines of bureaucratic responsibility. In New York City it is not difficult to make change in a Community School District if you have the support of the Community Superintendent--the Central Board is not usually interested in the day to day operation of a district. If the Superintendent is a forceful or likeable person who had established good relations with key Central Board administrators, a good deal of innovation can take place. If the good relationship happens to be with the Chancellor, a great deal of innovation can occur. It is always helpful if the Superintendent knows what he or she is intending to do; if the changes are good for teachers and children, no one will seriously interfere. If the changes raise reading and math scores, you can walk away with the store.

The paralysis of the New York City school bureaucracy has allowed individual educators the freedom to do what they think is best. What has been necessary is the recognition that it is your own choice, undertaken at your own initiative, to take that autonomy in hand. It might have meant giving up personal ambitions to climb the bureaucratic ladder, but if an educator was willing, and had some support for his or her effort, it has been possible to take real risks in the system.

The proposed recentralization would reduce those

possibilities, limiting opportunities for individuals to engage themselves in new educational ideas. Where power is all in the same hands, the pressure for schools to conform within the district, and for districts to conform within the system, is very great. The risk goes up on risk-taking; resistence to innovation increases. Recentralization closes the door on ownership, too, so the motive to improve a school dries up with the opportunity.

I think it is fair to say that the success of District No. 4 owes something to the "creative non-compliance" of teachers and administrators with the strictures of the Central Board of Education. In slipping between the cracks of bureaucratic hierarchy, we were able improve the ability of children in East Harlem to read and write and handle mathematics at a rate that has drawn the approbation of scholars, political leaders, and individuals of every calling with some concern for public education in this country. The move to recentralization threatens the program of choice in District No. 4, and the emergence of other programs that might enrich the education of our children.

The advantages of recentralization, in addressing the corruption and incompetence of some local school districts, are altogether unclear. Corruption does not discriminate; it takes place at all levels. In a centralized system, we do not know the corrupters until they are exposed by the media; in a decentralized system, the likely corrupters are known by all and

have to be more careful. The case has yet to be made that large bureaucracies in the City of New York are guarantees against individual vice and mismanagement.

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